

# Pre-Service Teachers' Middle-Level Lessons on World Religions: Planning, Teaching, and Reflecting

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how 22 elementary pre-service teachers (PSTs) planned and taught lessons on world religions to 7<sup>th</sup>-grade students. Pre- and post-lesson interview transcripts, lesson observations, as well as PST lesson plans and reflection journals served as data sources. Prior to teaching, the PSTs lacked adequate knowledge of world religions, were apprehensive about the task, and sought to teach without bias. Despite attempts at powerful and purposeful social studies teaching that was student-centered, the PSTs portrayed a bias toward Christianity, lacked solemnity, and were unprepared for student reactions. Because nearly each state includes world religions in its social studies standards, teachers must improve their capacity and willingness to teach world religions effectively.

**Keywords:** religion, social studies, teacher education, Christian bias

## 1. Introduction

"We cannot teach history without teaching about religion any more than we can prepare beer without using yeast. Something would be missing" (Passe & Wilcox, 2009, p. 103). Supreme Court Justice Tom Clark wrote in his opinion of the 1963 case, *School District of Abington Township, PA v. Schemp*: "One's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion." The significance of religion's role in the study of the past is undeniable. Likewise, any study of the present, particularly through the lenses of civics, cultural geography, and anthropology, must also prioritize the study of world religions. The acceleration of globalization requires an understanding and tolerance of various religions if peace and economic prosperity are sought (Passe & Wilcox, 2009). Furthermore, "By studying about religion, students will have the opportunity to learn a set of important intellectual reasoning skills that they might not develop in other classes and pursuits" (Wexler, 2002, p. 1200). An education would not be complete without knowledge of religion and its role in the past and present (Anderson, 2004).

The release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 initiated a conversation in the US about its role in the global society; and, the countless summits, commissions, and reports that followed, motivated primarily by pursuit of global competitiveness, gave notable attention to the teaching of world cultures and religions. The first major attempt at national history standards originated with the Bradley Commission on History in Schools, created in 1987 to address the perpetually-held public sentiment that kids do not know enough about the past. The Bradley Commission, consisting of 17 members representing vast variation on the political and ideological spectrum (Jackson, 1989), unanimously recommended all public school students learn "the origins and spread of influential religions and ideologies" (Bradley, 1989, p. 10).

Following cataclysmic controversy over the 1994 version of the National History Standards (Nash, Crabtree, & Dunn (2000), the National Center for History in the Schools published a basic set of history standards, which included explicit themes related to the rise and diffusion of the world's major religions. Conversely, the National Council for the Social Studies published their National Standards for Social Studies Teacher in 1997, and did not specifically indentify the teaching of world religions. Since the initial rise of the standards movement in the mid-1990's, however, essentially every state has adopted curricular standards for social studies, each of which includes the teaching of world religions – typically, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism (Douglass, 2000). Accelerated by a national influence on curriculum from initiatives like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, teaching about religion is an undeniable component of today's social studies classrooms.

What's more, teacher accountability is now linked to student performance on standardized tests, which are based on the mandated standards. Thus, there is increased incentive for teachers to teach about religion and to teach about religion effectively.

Despite the ubiquity of world religions in state standards for social studies, many teachers historically have avoided the subject, either partially or entirely (Black, 2003; Evans, 2007; Evans, 2008; Graves, Hynes, & Hughes, 2010; Oldendorf & Green, 2005; Passe & Wilcox, 2009; Wexler, 2002; Zam & Stone, 2006), for a variety of reasons. Furthermore, there is a paucity of research on pre-service and in-service training on teaching about religion. Susan Douglass (2001), one of the few scholars advocating for serious attention to the preparation of teachers for teaching about religion, suggested that a remarkably low number of "elementary teachers would argue that they were well prepared to realize the potential benefits of teaching about religion . . . even in terms of the basics (p. 11). Similarly, Passe and Wilcox (2009) asserted blankly: "American schools are not ready to teach religion" (p. 105).

### *1.1 Background and Purpose of the Study*

Despite the overwhelming consensus that social studies teachers teach about world religions, very little research exists regarding the manner and extent to which teachers actually teach world religions in the classroom. What's more, we were unable to locate any studies on pre-service teachers teaching world religions either during field experiences or student teaching. If social studies advocates seek to improve the teaching of world religions, teacher education must be the starting point. In order to improve how teacher education programs prepare future teachers to teach about world religions, it is helpful to understand how pre-service teachers (PSTs) currently approach the subject.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how 22 elementary PSTs at a mid-sized public university in Michigan planned and taught lessons on world religions to 7<sup>th</sup>-grade students. The primary goal of the study was to help instructors understand more about the extent to which they need to address issues and methods related specifically to the teaching of world religions. Most elementary teachers are required to take only one social studies methods course, which includes history, geography, civics, and economics. Like methods instructors in the other disciplines, social studies methods instructors suffer from having too much to teach in too little time. Understanding the religious stereotypes and biases that PSTs bring to the classroom can help instructors situate the topic of teaching world religions appropriately in the hierarchy of importance.

In this study, the PSTs were enrolled in a block of four methods courses during the semester prior to student teaching as part of a field-intensive undergraduate teacher education program that uses a cohort model to provide PSTs with increasing classroom responsibilities over four semesters. One of the field experiences of the semester involves a four-day unit during which the PSTs work in groups of three or four to deliver lessons in all subjects to classrooms of 7<sup>th</sup>-grade students. Essentially, the local 7<sup>th</sup>-grade teachers turn over their classes to the PSTs for four days, where each PST is the lead teacher for at least one lesson in math, science, and social studies, with English-language arts integrated throughout.

Early each semester, the cooperating teachers identify the specific Michigan Grade-Level Content Expectations (GLCEs) they would like the PSTs to teach in each subject during the field experience. Over the past 12 semesters that we have conducted this field experience, the cooperating middle-school teachers have revealed in conversations that they tend to identify GLCEs they would prefer not to teach. Of the 83 GLCEs for 7<sup>th</sup>-grade social studies, the cooperating teachers identified three standards that they wanted the PSTs to teach over the four days, which fell under the following goal: "Explain how world religions or belief systems of Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism and Islam grew and their significance" ([http://michigan.gov/documents/mde/SSGLCE\\_218368\\_7.pdf](http://michigan.gov/documents/mde/SSGLCE_218368_7.pdf) (p. 62).

It is important to note that although the participants were taking an elementary social studies methods course, very little class time was spent specifically on teaching the PSTs how to teach world religions. Rather, the course focused on teaching K-8 social studies generally, including concepts like writing objectives, scaffolding, differentiation, higher-order questioning, and assessment, all embedded in study of teaching history, geography, civics, and economics. The course involved several field experiences on a variety of topics, leaving little time to address the teaching of religion directly.

This study used multiple sources of data, including pre- and post-interviews of the PSTs, lesson-plans, lesson observations, 7<sup>th</sup>-grade students' work, PST reflection papers, and debriefing discussions to examine how 22 PSTs worked in small groups to create their *scope and sequences* for the week, and to plan and teach their individual lessons.

## 1.2 Review of Literature

Several Supreme Court cases dating back to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century have established religion's place in public education (Black, 2003). Neutrality toward religion, however, pervades all case law and corresponding recommendations from educational leaders. As Black espouses, school can teach *about* religion, but they must remain neutral.

Collaboration among educational and religious organizations on creating guidelines for schools and teachers has been impressive. Based on the group effort of more than a dozen organizations, in 2000 the US Department of Education sent every public-school principal an informational packet on guidelines for the teaching of religion in schools (Douglass, 2000). Though the teaching of religion is receiving increased attention, typically the topic is taught in a month or less (Douglass, 2001). A common complaint from teachers is that there are too many standards to teach, and consequently they are not able to address any topic in depth. As Douglass noted, this leaves teachers with a minimal amount of time to cover the "origins, beliefs, traditions, customs, and leading personalities" of each religion (p. 5).

Attention must be paid to how each standard is taught. Douglass (2001) warned that teachers must avoid "trivializing world religions into a study of surviving rituals, customs, and dress, and cookery" (p. 10). Similarly, the NCSS (2009) cautioned against the piecemeal approach to social studies that lacks focus and coherence but instead focuses on food, festivals and fun. The teaching of world religions should be based on the guidelines from the US Department of Education and should utilize primary sources to bridge historical and contemporary events (Douglass, 2000; Nord, 1990).

Despite clear content standards for the teaching of world religions, and widespread agreement among advocates over how the topic should be taught, the reasons *why* world religions are not being taught are still unclear. Certainly, some of the blame must start with teacher education programs. Zam and Stone (2006) surveyed 342 social studies teacher educators, 94% of whom reported that they do not think their social studies methods course should include teaching PSTs how to teach about world religions. Additionally, 92% suggested that teaching about religion does not belong in the public school classroom. If teacher educators are not proponents of teaching about world religions, it is reasonable to conclude that PSTs will not be either.

Classroom teachers themselves must also accept some of the blame for the absence of adequate instruction about world religions. In a study of 26 public teachers in Texas, Graves et al. (2010) learned that 25 (96%) of those teachers were being confused or nervous about the role of religion in the classroom, despite clear state standards and curriculum materials that specify what teachers can and should teach. In addition to their lack of understanding of religion's role in their classrooms, most teachers do not have time to cover their curricula and consequently marginalize the teaching of world religions. Teacher educators, many of whom spent considerable time in social studies classrooms, overwhelmingly reported that social studies teachers do not have enough time to teach world religions (Zam & Stone, 2006). Simply, the teaching of world religions has been easy to avoid.

In spite of the various published studies purporting that the teaching of world religions is generally ignored in social studies classrooms, little research has been conducted in actual classrooms. There are very few peer-reviewed articles describing how teachers actually teach world religions in public school classrooms. In one such frequently cited article, Ayers and Reid (2005) described how their elementary school used a curriculum supplement on world religions to study current issues. Though they claimed, "sixth-grade students achieved a deeper understanding of many current events" (p. 15), they did not note how many students they studied or the methods of their research.

Lester and Roberts (2011) examined the impact of a nine-week world religions course on the attitudes and beliefs of students. Attitudinal surveys on 350 students, as well as interviews with 22 students and numerous educators, revealed that students grew more knowledgeable and tolerant. Aown (2011) conducted a case study of one non-Muslim teacher who taught a unit on Islam in a world religions course and concluded that the teacher found the task to be highly challenging, yet rewarding. Though Aown's case study methods were robust, all of the data came from the teacher's perspective through interviews. Like Lester and Roberts, Aown did not conduct observations of classroom practice.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Participants

The PSTs, from an approximately 9,000-student public university in the upper-Midwest, were predominately Caucasian, female (87%), and in their early- to mid-20s. Using the Pew categories for religious affiliation, we asked the candidates to identify their personal religion. Sixteen (72%) PSTs declared that they were *Christian* (8

Roman Catholic and 8 Protestants), one *Hindu*, four (18%) *Agnostic/Atheist*, and one *Other* (the PST wrote, “spiritual”).

The local rural school district in which PSTs participate in numerous field experiences, serves approximately 2,500 K-12 students, 91% of whom are Caucasian, 4% African American, 2% Native American, and 1% Asian. Students represent a wide range of socio-economic levels, including 33% who qualify for free or reduced lunch. Demographic information on the religious affiliations of the students themselves is not available; however, in the community that the district serves, 57% of population is affiliated with a congregation, of whom 52% are Catholic and 48% are Protestant (www.citydata.com).

## 2.2 Data Collection

In order to understand how the PSTs planned and taught lessons on world religions to 7<sup>th</sup>-grade students, we collected data from multiple sources, increasing validity through triangulation (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). One of us was the instructor for the social studies methods course in which this field experience was situated. The other two authors were graduate assistants, both of whom have been classroom teachers.

Two weeks prior to the field experience, the graduate assistants interviewed all 22 PSTs individually about their planning process. Another source of data included the PSTs’ lesson plans, which were submitted for a grade one week prior to the field experience. We graded the lesson plans, but focused on general lesson plan components rather than world religions specifically. We were able to observe each of the PSTs teaching at least one lesson, during which we circulated throughout the classrooms making observations, sitting in on lessons, and recording our interpretation of the events. This phenomenological approach situated us as participant observers who continuously worked to acknowledge and bracket our assumptions (Moustakas, 1994). Though we gave informal constructive feedback to the PSTs about their teaching generally, we did not assess the PSTs teaching competence using a rubric or other tool.

Following their lessons, the PSTs were required to respond in writing to reflection questions about teaching in general and about teaching world religions specifically. During the week following the lessons, the graduate assistants again interviewed each of the PSTs individually, and the instructor lead debriefing discussions with the PSTs in class.

## 2.3 Data Analysis

Beginning during the initial planning stages of this study and continuing throughout the data collection and analysis phases, we attempted to set aside our personal religious experiences and beliefs to minimize research influence on the findings and conclusions. For this study, we did not discuss our own religious beliefs or practices. As we engaged in frequent open and honest conversations about the data, we continually challenged each other about our assumptions and interpretations (Cresswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009).

For several hours each week over two semesters we met, both formally and informally, to analyze the data, formulate assertions, challenge those assertions, and seek rival explanations. Using constant comparison method, our analysis of the multiple forms of data was concurrent and iterative, with the goal of triangulations to increase validity (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Straus, 1967; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). We began by coding the data into the two phases of the field experience, planning and teaching. Next, we used open coding to create initial sub-codes under the two primary categories. Then, using focused coding, we arrayed the sub-codes into broader conceptual categories under which we create an additional layer of sub-codes until the data reached a point of saturation (Charmaz, 2006).

## 3. Findings

This section is arranged into two main subsections, which are aligned with the chronological phases of the PSTs’ field experience on world religions – planning and teaching. The data from subsection on Planning yielded three themes (Lack of knowledge, Desire for non-bias, and Apprehension) and the Teaching subsection contains four main themes (Powerful and purposeful social studies, Lack of solemnity, PSTs’ Christian bias, and Students’ Christian bias). In this section, we describe those themes and include examples of PST reflections and interview statements that corroborate the themes.

### 3.1 Planning

The PSTs were given their assigned content standards six weeks before they taught their lessons on world religions. Each of the three or four group members was required to teach at least one lesson for a full class period, solo. The other group members were to act as teachers’ assistants, primarily working with high-needs students while the PST was in charge of typical teacher duties. Because each group was given three grade-level

content expectations (GLCEs) to teach over the four days, the group members had to decide which GLCE each would teach and in what order. The PSTs were not given time in their methods course to plan for the lessons, so all planning took place on their own time. Three principal themes related the PSTs' planning to their teach lessons on world religions emerged from the interview and reflection data.

### 3.1.1 PSTs' Insufficient Knowledge

Nearly every PST noted that she did not know enough about world religions and had to spend time studying and researching the topics. For example, one PST said in her interview:

I didn't really know any information about any of them, so I really had to do my research, which was probably the hardest part because there was a ton of information and a lot of language in the religions that I didn't know. So, I had to do my own research, and in the end it was easier to teach all of them because I did have the background knowledge.

As a result of the research the PSTs' had to conduct, their planning often took longer than expected:

While my lesson plan was detailed and very helpful, I was not expecting it to take as long as it did to research and write it. Even after all of the lesson plans I have wrote throughout my schooling, I am still surprised as to how many hours it takes to write a 50-minute lesson. I feel that my social studies lesson took me quite a bit longer than most lesson plans I have done. Because of the range of the topic, I feel I spent more time researching than anything else.

Not surprisingly, the PSTs frequently expressed a lack of knowledge about religions other than Christianity. For example, one PST stated in her interview:

Christianity will be the easiest because as I was reading I was like I know all of this. Buddhism and Hinduism will be the hardest because I don't know how to say/pronounce most of the things and there are a lot of things I just don't know about.

The PSTs were also quick to acknowledge their classmates' lack of knowledge. One PST remarked, "Some [of the PSTs], I think, are just afraid to say something wrong because they don't know a lot about religions."

Despite the abundance of information available, a complication arose from their uncertainty over the accuracy of some of the sources the PSTs discovered. One PST stated:

The most difficult part of it was trying to find the information that was right. Because there is so much information online, so you never know if it's right or not. I mean you can check it, but you never know because there's always a couple sources that say something different. So I think that was the most difficult part and then trying to figure out how to put all that information into one short quick lesson

Furthermore, the PSTs noted how, from the onset, they were concerned with differentiating between teaching religion and teaching about religion. For example, PSTs made comments like the following: "I was simply so paranoid that the information I was finding on the religions was theory based instead of fact based;" and, "I wanted to make sure that the information I am getting is accurate and unbiased." Because the PSTs lacked knowledge of world religions, it was difficult for them to quickly scrutinize the validity of sources.

### 3.1.2 Desire for Equity and Non-Bias

The PSTs expressed a clear desire to remain unbiased in their teaching of world religions. For example, one PST stated, "I think everybody is able to see we are teaching for learning rather than preaching it." Because they were assigned to groups of three or four, the PSTs had to negotiate the scope and sequence of their four-day unit. The cooperating teachers only requested that they teach the state standards, not that they teach those standards in any particular order or arrangement. Consequently, the PSTs had to distribute the teaching topics and duties. In two groups, the PSTs assigned the topics randomly. For example, one PST revealed, "To pick who was doing what religion, [my group] drew out of a hat because we wanted to treat all religions equally." As result of being assigned to teach Christianity and Judaism, one PST lamented the challenges this might bring: "I wish I had gotten different religion because it would be easy for me to be biased with these religions."

In other groups, the PSTs each picked the religions they wanted to teach, which was nearly always intended to avoid bias. One PST stated, "I didn't want to sound too persuasive, so I decided to teach Islam and not teach Christianity." Another PST expressed concern about her group members:

We could put different spins on the different religions, but I am hoping we won't and will treat the religions equally. We made a list of what we want to incorporate with the hope of keeping an even aspect throughout each religion.

Not all PSTs were as hopeful. This PST expressed concern that her group member's bias might be explicit:

I am afraid it might be the way they state the information. They might think that their religion is right and the others are wrong, so they may view it or say it differently, you know. Subconsciously they might project a negative view through their tone or wording.

### 3.1.3 Apprehension

The PSTs revealed that they were quite nervous about having to teach world religions to 7<sup>th</sup>-grade students. Some of this apprehension could be attributed to their lack of experience working with middle-level students, particularly since all of the PSTs were elementary education majors, most of whom desire to work with younger students (Anderson, 2010). Much of their nervousness was of a general nature. For example, one PST stated, "I am nervous about being asked questions that I don't know and being unprepared to answer them, but I think that comes with every lesson you teach. I think that's the most nerve-wracking thing."

Beyond the expected apprehension that accompanies pre-service practicum teaching episodes, the PSTs in this study expressed nervousness about teaching world religions, specifically. There were two main reasons they gave for being nervous: religion is a sensitive subject, and they were not confident in their knowledge about world religions. For example, one PST said:

I'm nervous about screwing something up because it's a pretty touchy subject obviously, and I don't want to because I'm sure there's going to be a lot of students that are going to know a lot more about Christianity than I do and know a lot more about Judaism than I do right now. I don't want to put them on a path that is incorrect.

Their fear of controversy was palpable, and revealed in comments like the following: "By no means did I want to come off to the students as if I was preaching any of the specific religions we were teaching – which was another reason I found myself literally scared to teach these lessons."

It was ironic that some PSTs revealed their biases and lack of sensitivity and awareness while trying to explain their intent to remain unbiased: "I am worried about saying something wrong or doing something wrong and offending someone. I think that ones [students] that would be easily offended do not live here, though." Another PST remarked, "I don't want to offend anyone. Someone from Judaism, are they referred to as Jewish or Jew? I worry about being politically correct with proper names."

## 3.2 Teaching

To determine how the PSTs actually taught their lessons, we analyzed data from the PST interviews, reflections, and lesson plans, as well as our observations of their teaching. Our analyses yielded four themes related to how they delivered their lessons to the 7<sup>th</sup>-grade students, which we describe in this section.

### 3.2.1 Powerful and Purposeful Teaching

The social studies methods course in which the PSTs were enrolled is anchored in the NCSS principles for powerful and purposeful teaching, according to which: "Teaching and learning in the elementary classroom should be meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active" ([www.socialstudies.org](http://www.socialstudies.org)). The PSTs' lessons in this study each met at least some of those principles. Overwhelmingly, the PSTs strove to teach using student-centered methods. The following quotes demonstrate the PSTs' commitment to student-centeredness:

Most of [my activities] were all center related, so the students were taking the documents, maps, packets, and information . . . because I think it would have been harder to stand up there and lecture . . . I think it would have gone right over their heads and been boring.

I feel that I differentiated my instruction quite well by doing yoga, showing a Hindu creation video/story, using PowerPoint to touch on a few main points, introducing Gandhi, incorporating some discussion and by showing a visual of karma. I think this variation helped students to stay focused and it helped that we didn't spend too much time on one thing.

From our observations, we deemed only three of the 22 PSTs to have taught lessons that were meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active. One of those exemplars, described her lesson as follows:

I had the students respond to a question about the Prophet Muhammad appearing in the cartoon television show "South Park". The students did a double take when they saw "South Park" in the text. Of course, this sparked their interest and every single student responded very well to the writing prompt. After they read this they didn't understand why it was a big deal that someone had drawn Muhammad, and they started riffling through the documents to find more. I didn't deliver this by saying it to them or asking this question in front of the class, but

I slipped it in at the center about the Islamic faith. It's amazing that giving students a simple connection can spark their interest.

Many PSTs, however, in attempt to make their teaching engaging, prioritized lesson activities that were active at the expense of activities that were challenging. For example, one PST, who like most PSTs, struggled with not having enough time, and reflected: "I just had to cut out the centers but was still able to do my karma center with the whole group." Several PSTs used skits in their lessons, usually with little success, especially because of the sensitivity of the content. One PST reflected:

We did skits where the students practiced being sensitive to beliefs of people who we had learned about in my lesson. This turned into more of a fun time; my biggest regret during this lesson was that I couldn't think of anything else to do with them during this time

One of this PST's group members commented on that lesson in her post-teaching interview:

She also tried to have the kids do skits, and it didn't work out well. She was trying to give them scenarios about like cultural/religious differences - like some people go to church, some people wear this, and the kids didn't understand how different that could be. I don't think they understood the concept because the kids were poking fun, and they were just poorly done.

### 3.2.2 Lack of Awareness of Solemnity

The skits were a good example of the lack of seriousness the candidates demonstrated about the non-Christian religions. Each of the seven PST groups used at least one skit-type activity, but none of the groups lead a skit on Christianity.

I think they had fun with my Buddhist activity, where they made origami boats and sailed them through the classroom on a string to symbolize the Buddhist holiday where they float down the river their bad luck

Both before and after their lessons, the PSTs acknowledged lack of knowledge of world religions. On the surface, this lack of knowledge made their experiences more difficult than if they were teaching another topic. For example, one PST remarked: "There was nothing easy about coming into a classroom of 31 seventh graders and teaching a world religion that I had just learned myself."

Beyond the surface, however, the candidate's lack of knowledge of world religions was revealed in several ways. For example, we observed at least two different lessons in which the PSTs used a picture of Muhammad in their presentation. In both cases when we pointed out that Islam forbids the display of images of Muhammad, neither of the PSTs had any awareness. Furthermore, both of the PSTs replied that "no one said anything," referring to their group mates and their students.

Another way in which the candidates demonstrated their lack of religious awareness was through their use of generalizing language. In our observations of their teaching, we frequently heard the PSTs make statements like, "Buddhists meditate;" or, "Followers of Hinduism don't eat meat because they believe in reincarnation," as if all Buddhists meditate and all Hindus are vegetarians. In her post-teaching interview one PST said, "My lesson was unbiased because I told them straight-up, 'This is what they believe'."

PSTs used the collective pronoun "they" extensively and seldom included the descriptor "some" when describing to students the practices of religious adherents. One PST recognized this lack of nuance when reflecting on one of her group members' lessons:

[My group member] asked, "Do you think women like wearing full body dress or do you think they don't?" I think the idea that was supposed to come across was that some women do and some women don't because they can feel constraint. But what I feel came across was that, yeah, they like doing it, and this is what they want to do, and I don't know whether the kids were focused in on it or not, but I thought it was important to express that some women really do like it and some women feel trapped or constrained by it.

Fortunately, four of the 22 PSTs brought preexisting stereotypes to the forefront. For example one PST described her lesson on Islam:

I started off by leading a discussion on the Islamic religion, and got some great responses from the class. We talked about what the word Islam made students think of. One student said, "9/11", which was a great response. It led into a wonderful group discussion of stereotypes and unfair bias.

Islam and Judaism, however, were the only religions about which the PSTs addressed stereotypes and generalizations. For Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism, the PSTs presented the material as if the adherents possessed universal beliefs and exhibited homogenous actions.

### 3.2.3 PSTs' Christian Bias

Overwhelmingly, the PSTs in this study portrayed a Christian bias, in both tacit and explicit ways. As mentioned above, their use of language subtleties was obvious. We commonly heard the PSTs refer to adherents of the non-Christian religions as "followers of . . ."; yet, we never heard a PST use the expression, "followers of Christianity." They always used the term "Christians," but seldom used "Hindus", "Muslims", "Jews", or "Buddhists".

The PSTs' Christian bias was not always as subtle. At times, the PSTs made outright assumptions about the students' backgrounds. For example, one PST said to the class, "You guys already know a lot about Christianity, right?" In one classroom, a PST asked the students what they knew about Christianity and then called on six students who had their hands raised. He went on to ask the students what they knew about Confucianism, Buddhism, and Islam, and then said, "You probably don't know because they are not as popular. Do you know anything about them? No, probably not." The cooperating teacher, who had been working on his computer off to the side, injected, "It'd be better to classify those religions as 'less practiced' rather than 'less popular'."

At least five of PSTs used a Christian-centric approach to teaching about the other religions. For example, one PST commented: "With Buddhism, karma and Nirvana were really easy to talk about and the kids can kind of relate to that because nirvana is basically their form of heaven, and most of the kids can relate to heaven."

We observed two PSTs whose lessons on Christianity were clearly teaching the religion rather than teaching about its history. Their lessons bordered on preaching. For example, one PST said to the class, "Christianity was founded when Jesus died for your sins." During a post-lesson interview, this PST admitted, "My lesson was more of a Sunday school lesson than it was teaching about the religion." Another PST taught a lesson using Christianity's Ten Commandments. For 30 minutes of his 50-minute lesson, he had the students look through copies of local newspapers to find examples of how the Ten Commandments have "shaped our society."

### 3.2.4 Students' Christian Bias

The bias toward Christianity was not limited to the PSTs' teaching directly. PSTs reflected on how they were unprepared for their students' reactions to their lessons. This excerpt illustrates one PST's experience with her students' Christian bias:

When I did teach Christianity, there were a lot of students obviously that go to church and believe in that, so I think they were making it more biased than I did. Like when we were talking about the spread, I had a YouTube video that showed all of the spread from the beginning to now and how it all spread throughout the world. And the students were like, "Yeah, it's Christianity, and they're winning." It was really hard to like twist that, so it was more of them being biased than me. But I don't think they really meant to be biased, it's just that's what they know.

During a lesson on Judaism two of us observed, the PST conducted an opening activity during which she gave each student a slip of paper with the name of a famous or noteworthy Jew. She asked the students to share their names with their tablemates to determine what the people had in common. After none of the student groups discovered the commonality, she simply told the students that they were all Jews. Upon hearing the PST's comment, several students responded with incredulity. One student shouted, "Are you serious?" The PST, clearly taken aback, asked the student what he meant by his comment. Another student then responded, "These people can't be Jewish; they're funny. . . like Adam Sandler and Ben Stiller." Flustered, the PST quickly told the students that those comments were inappropriate and that, "People who practice Judaism can do any job" before she hurriedly moved on to her next lesson activity without discussing their comments again. When we asked her about this episode afterward, the PST replied that she was so taken aback by the students' reaction that she didn't know what to do.

The PSTs were also surprised by the number of students who questioned the legality or appropriateness of teaching of world religions. In some cases, the PSTs attempted to provide reasons why they were teaching about world religions. For example, one PST commented:

The students were asking questions about church and state and, 'Is this legal?'. So, we had to explain to them that we're not teaching them what's right and wrong. We're just showing you what else is out there in the world.

In other cases, the PSTs addressed the legality issue directly:

One of our students was talking about how it was illegal for us to teach about world religions in their classroom. My group tried to explain to them how we were only teaching about the different kinds of world religions, which



wasn't illegal. If we were telling you which religion we think you should be a part of, because that is what we think, that would be the illegal part of the situation

Not one PST, however, mentioned the mandated state standards to the students. None of the PSTs showed the state standards to the students to start their units on world religions, and none of them responded to student questions about legality or appropriateness by showing the students how the standards give direction to what teachers should teach and consequently what students should learn. Communication with the students about the standards could have alleviated problems like the one illustrated by one PST who explained how a Christian student refused to participate in her lesson activity on reincarnation. Not knowing how to handle the student's objection, the PST allowed the student to sit out, but wondered afterward: "I guess I'm curious as to what I would do if I had a student who believed strongly in one religion and refused to look at any other religion or be open to religion lessons."

#### **4. Discussion**

For a number of reasons, elementary social studies teachers lack the necessary content knowledge to teach world religions effectively (Ayers & Reid, 2005; Glanzer, 1998; Marty & Moore, 2000; Rogers, 2011; Wright, 1999; Zam & Stone, 2006). The PSTs in this study admitted and demonstrated their lack of knowledge about world religions, though it is not clear how the PSTs' knowledge of world religions compares with their knowledge of other social studies topics. Nonetheless, teachers' lack of knowledge impacts how well they teach, particularly since higher teacher self-efficacy leads to higher student achievement (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006). Our findings suggest that teacher preparation programs should take prioritize the topic of world religions in social studies methods courses.

Similar to what Oldendorf and Green (2005) found in their study of 10 teachers, the PSTs in this study demonstrated their ignorance in several ways, ranging from mispronunciations and insensitive comments to making erroneous statements. Douglass (2001) warned that accurate teaching of world religions requires a sophisticated understanding of each religion's beliefs, practices, and traditions. For example, she noted: "[M]any religious persons would object to calling a prophet or other spiritual leader a 'founder' because the religion's true 'origin,' according to its adherents, lies in revelation or spiritual communion with God" (p. 12). Likewise, Norton (2001) suggested that teachers should avoid referring to religious leaders by their sacred titles and that they must avoid oversimplification and generalization. Furthermore, experts on the teaching of world religions recommend avoiding role-playing activities altogether (Nord & Haynes, 1998). Clearly, the PSTs in this study lacked understanding of these concepts.

On a positive note, many PSTs used primary source documents in their lessons, which Douglass (2001) and Nord (1990) advocated. Douglass (2001) criticized how teachers typically treat religions as "exotic relics of the distant past" (p. 5), which undermines recommendations that the study of world religions should demonstrate how the religions present themselves in modern times; however, the PSTs in this study emphasized the role of religion in modern times, perhaps at the expense of adequately teaching the historical underpinnings of each religion.

Overall, the PSTs' knowledge of world religions tended to be inadequate, and their teaching was biased toward Christianity. The PSTs in this study desired to be effective teachers of world religions, but they lacked the knowledge, dispositions, and specific methods to do so. Though social studies methods instructors lack the time to teach many important topics, world religion is one topic that cannot be marginalized.

#### **5. Limitations**

The PSTs in this study demonstrated a number of strengths and weaknesses. We do not know, how many of those themes were unique to their assigned topic of world religions. For example, would the PSTs have demonstrated equally inadequate content knowledge if they were assigned to teach the agricultural revolution, another 7<sup>th</sup>-grade content standard? Would they have been similarly unprepared to handle student reactions if they taught technology patterns and networks?

Likewise, some of the PSTs' positive episodes might have emerged from any topic they were assigned to teach. Accordingly, the PSTs certainly planned and taught in a manner they thought would have pleased the instructor. In particular, the social studies methods course emphasizes student-centered teaching with explicit connections between historical content and students' lives today. As mentioned above, little course time was spent on helping the PSTs prepare to teach world religions specifically, but much time was spent on powerful and purposeful social studies teaching in general.

Finally, we must acknowledge our data included the PSTs' interpretations of their actions, as well as those of their classmates. In many of those instances, we were not available to observe those actions in order to corroborate or refute their interpretations.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Beyond the legal, pedagogical, and philosophical arguments for teaching world religions, pragmatic reasons are likely to increase teachers' attention on world religions. For the first time in the history of public education in the US, the majority of teachers are going to be evaluated based on their students' performance on standardized tests. In other words, teacher effectiveness is going to be determined by their students' achievement on standardized tests, which will be based off the CCSS. Though CCSS for social studies have not yet been finalized, nearly all states include world religions in their standards.

It should come as no surprise that advocates of education about world religions recommend a number of measures to correct many problems described in this paper. At the center of those recommendations is teacher training, both for in-service and pre-service teachers (Douglass, 2001). Teacher knowledge and training are essential to eradicating the many problems with the subject currently, particularly that teachers are not confident or competent to teach it (Grelle, 2006). Teachers with high self-efficacy about teaching world religions are more willing to teach those standards (Black, 2003). Teacher educators must not ignore the teaching of world religions in their social studies methods courses.

However, even if methods instructors designate more time and attention to teaching PSTs how to teach about world religions, it might not be enough. Certainly, an additional methods course would be welcomed by most instructors; yet, anyone with a rudimentary understanding of the forces that influence credit requirements for teacher education programs recognizes that adding more courses to pre-service teachers' programs is not realistic. Most elementary teacher education programs require only one social studies methods course, which Passe and Wilcox suggested, "is insufficient to develop instructional techniques that promote tolerance, sensitivity, nonjudgmental expression of beliefs, and an in-depth grasp of the nuances of major world religions" (p. 105).

Therefore, the preparation of teachers to teach about world religions respectfully and effectively must also include in-service training. With the CCSS looming and many states shifting to a *State Continuing Education Clock Hours* (SCECH) model of continuing education for teachers, summer institutes and other professional development sessions present additional opportunities for teachers to improve the capacity and willingness to teach world religions effectively. It is important to keep in mind, however, that one-off workshops are unlikely to be sufficient (Passe & Wilcox, 2009). Professional development for teachers should be ongoing in duration and coherence (NSDC, 2009). Increased emphasis in elementary social studies methods courses and in sustained professional development for in-service teachers puts students on a path toward gaining "knowledge of the roles of religion in the past and present [to] promote cross-cultural understanding essential to democracy and world peace" (Haynes & Thomas, 2001, p. 90).

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